

Wellfleet Recycling Committee Statement on Plastic Bag Pollution

What's wrong with plastic bags? They're cheap, lightweight, strong, recyclable and are good to use in our wastepaper baskets. The alternative paper bag is more expensive, heavier, tears easily and is not leak proof.

So why not prefer plastic bags? Although cheap, they have a very low recycling value. According to the EPA, most plastic bags are not recycled. In 2012, 3,370,000 tons of plastic bags, wraps and sacks were not recycled in the US. (1) In landfills they will virtually never degrade. Incineration does get rid of them, but presents its own serious pollution problems, even with the best incinerators. (2) When plastic bags find their way into the marine environment, they release any chemicals present in their manufacture, and attract to themselves a host of the persistent chemicals and microbes which have ended up in our oceans. (3) They break down into small particles which are ingested by plankton, which are in turn eaten by fish. Thus these toxins are concentrated up the food chain to larger and larger animals. Whales for example, are accumulating the highest doses of persistent organic chemicals. (4) Animal studies indicate that infertility, birth defects and many common diseases such as cancer and diabetes increase dramatically with exposure to these endocrine disrupting chemicals. (5) (6)

In Wellfleet we should be thinking about the invisible long term health effects of plastic pollution. By banning plastic shopping bags, we can help protect our local waters, as well as our fishing and shell fishing industries. We now know there are 5 huge gyres of plastic in our oceans, one of which has been estimated to be twice the size of Texas. 88% of the oceans' surface is polluted with plastic debris. (7) Does the convenience of a plastic bag outweigh the damage to our planet and to ourselves?

We should support this plastic bag ban because we are a small but influential community that can expand the effort started by other Massachusetts and Cape Cod towns to reduce plastic pollution. Let's make shopping with reusable bags the right thing to do in Wellfleet.

1 EPA 2012 PLASTICS IN PRODUCTS IN MSW, Table 7.

2 Jenna Russell, "AG investigating waste incinerator", January 4, 2011, Boston Globe.

3 Adil Bakir et al., "Relative importance of microplastics as a pathway for the transfer of persistent organic pollutants to marine life." (University of Plymouth, UK) MICRO conference, Plouzane, France, 2014.

4 Wild Whales b.c. sightings network, "Pollution Threats", wildwhales.org.

5 Susan Casey, "Our Oceans are Turning into Plastic...Are We?", Men's Health, October 5, 2010

6 Gary Taubes, "Interview with Dr. Ana Soto (Tufts University) on endocrine disruptors", Sciencewatch, September, 2009.

7 Andres Cozar, "Plastic debris in the open ocean", Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, US National Academy of Sciences, July 15, 2014.